

promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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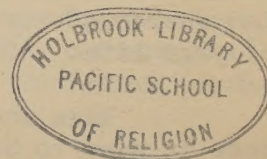
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What Does It Mean To Be A Christian Farmer?

By Shirley E. Greene*



Arthur Holt used to delight in telling the story of a dairy farmer in the Chicago milkshed. He was a member of a conservative and rather sternly-disciplined religious sect. In those days sanitary regulations governing milk production were not as highly developed as now, but they were coming. The current custom was that when a city dairy discovered too much dirt in a can of milk they slashed a big red cross on the outside of the can. When a farmer got back a can so marked, he became the object of social disfavor among his neighbors assembled at the milk depot to pick up their empties.

On one occasion the farmer in question found the big red crosses on two of his empties the same day. He was wroth, and in his anger he swore a mighty oath. The following Sunday he was called before an ecclesiastical hearing and severely condemned for his behavior. Holt's point was that his church disciplined him for taking the name of the Lord in vain; not because he had tried to feed contaminated milk to the babies of the city of Chicago.

I sat down one evening a year or so ago with a small group of farmers and their families in the heart of Oregon. Without preliminary comment I asked them the question which heads this paper: What does it mean to be a Christian farmer? Can you guess the answers I got? A Christian farmer should go to church regularly, should support the church, should read the Bible, should pray and have family prayers, should refrain from farm work on Sunday (unless it is necessary). That was all!

These rural folk had gone to Sunday school in their youth. They had attended church all their lives. They had read the Bible, listened to the preacher's sermons and to the teacher's expositions. Yet never before had it occurred to them or been suggested to them (apparently) that their Christian faith should have a bearing on how they practiced their vocation and how they conducted their business. Nor are they exceptional. In my experience, which has included raising similar questions with similar groups in at least half the states of the Union, they are the rule.

The Rev. Shirley E. Greene is Agricultural Relations Secretary of The Council for Social Action of the Congregational Christian Churches. We are deeply indebted to Mr. Greene for this helpful paper.

This is not, of course, to say that there are no Christian farmers who give serious thought to the vocational implications of their Christian faith. I have met many who do, and I am sure there are many more — but not enough. There will never be enough until all who farm do so to the glory of God.

My own conviction is that the items mentioned by my little group of Oregon farmers are the barest mechanics of Christian living. When we have done these things we are only at the threshold of the Christian life. We are like the young man of Jesus' acquaintance who had kept the Commandments "from his youth." We have yet to hear the Master's compelling voice: "One thing thou lackest!" The essential thing! The whole thing! Go — sell — give — get rid of all the inferior loves and loyalties which bind you to sin and self. Let God's will become the source of every decision, every attitude, every practice, every relationship of your life. "Come and follow Me."

When such a challenge to total commitment is heard, the question: What does it mean to be a Christian farmer? takes on new depth and breadth. I cannot tell you what being a Christian farmer should mean to you. The answer to that question, in the last analysis, is a matter for the individual conscience. I believe I can identify some of the areas of a farmer's life in which his being Christian should make a difference. And I do have some convictions to share. Let's look at some cases.

The story is told of a farmer who refused to attend a meeting called by the county agricultural agent on better methods of land use. Said he: "What can that young college feller tell me about farming. I've worn out three farms in my own lifetime." This joke may be fiction, but the attitude it reveals toward God's created earth is no fiction — and no joke. It is all too common an attitude despite the growing emphasis since Theodore Roosevelt's day on national need for soil conservation.

When Moses heard the voice from the burning bush saying: "The place whereon thou standest is holy ground," he was standing in a sheep pasture. How many of our western ranchers recognize and use the range as "holy ground"? Browning has put it poetically, with that story in mind:

"Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God."

The rural church may not be in a position to conduct experiments in soil and water conservation nor, perhaps, to teach the techniques of conservation to the farmers in its parish. It is the business of the church, nevertheless, to make vividly clear that our pious pronouncement on Sunday: "The earth is the Lord's," and the like, has a bearing on the way we plow, the way we plant, and the way we harvest on Monday.

Some farmers waste natural resources through ignorance, some through indifference, some through greed, some under the pressure of economic necessity. The church has a ministry to each group. For the ignorant we can provide the latest bulletins and contacts with soil conservation technicians. The indifferent we can arouse to a new love for the holy earth and to a new sense of responsibility to "feed the hungry" not only today but tomorrow. Greed is sin, and the greedy farmer is a sinner even if his name adorns the church roll. He must be helped, not by denunciation but by the lure of a higher calling, to abandon his

selfish goal and embrace a new and Christian motivation. In behalf of the economically oppressed, the church can and must take up the banner of a just price and a fair income. Where tenancy is the cause of economic pressure leading to misuse of the land (as is all too often the case), the church must concern itself actively for the improvement of landlord-tenant relations and for the ultimate elimination of the kinds of irresponsible land tenure which inevitably produce poor land and poor people. At all times and in all cases we must teach the duty of the consuming public to pay its share of the cost of maintaining the original source of physical life -- the fertility of the earth.

A group of farmers in Kansas were meeting to discuss the development program for the Missouri Valley. Their attention focused on a small dam proposed, to be built by the Army Engineers on a small tributary in their community. It quickly appeared that all the farmers below the dam site (whose farms would be protected from floods) were in favor. All the farmers above the dam site (parts of whose farms would be permanently lost in the reservoir) were opposed. I asked: Is there any discernible difference between the grounds on which a Christian farmer judges this issue and those by which a pagan farmer reaches his position?" The answer was as blunt as it was revealing: "That has nothing to do with it. The question is do you live above the dam site or below it." This was in a country church and nearly all present were church members; yet there was no demur from that answer.

Two aspects of this attitude disturbed me. One was the completely selfish basis on which these farmers arrived at their position on an issue which was clearly one of broad community interest. The other was that apparently no one on either side was even trying to consider the role of this one little dam in the great over-all plan for land and water development, conservation, and use in the Missouri watershed. How far we have departed from the spirit and practice of those early Christians who "had all things common." The Lord "added daily" to that fellowship "such as should be saved." No one is adding daily to our rural churches nor will they until we again proclaim the general welfare and the public interest above the narrow, personal, economic interests of our farmer parishioners.

Before we leave this case, let's recognize that it is a good deal to ask one farmer or one little group of farmers to be Christian in attitude and practice while living daily amid a wholly secular and competitive economic system. If the farmers above the dam were being asked to surrender their land without fair compensation, I would be on their side. The "general welfare" is a fiction and a delusion if it is achieved at the cost of injustice to specific groups. Against this danger, the church must also guard. In this particular instance, of course, the farmers losing land will be paid by the government on the basis of an impartial appraisal.

In California I sat down one Saturday evening with a group of grape growers -- all leaders in their local church. I began to talk -- no doubt somewhat self-righteously -- about the responsibility of a Christian farmer to deal fairly and generously with his seasonal hired labor. I was quickly interrupted by a deacon who exclaimed: "You can't do that!" "Can't do what?" I inquired. "You can't act like a Christian in our kind of business -- not if you hope to be a it next year."

You can well imagine that an interesting discussion followed. I was hopelessly outnumbered. Not one of these hardheaded, realistic grape growers

would join me in defending the thesis that being a Christian would make a difference in the way you housed, paid, or treated the migratory picker. Not that you wouldn't like to treat him decently, but you just couldn't afford to. If you give him a break, he will take advantage of you, your competitors will take advantage of you, and the market will break you.

Finally I summarized: "Do I understand it to be your position that it is not possible to be both Christian and successful in the business of growing grapes in the San Joaquin Valley?" They agreed unanimously: "That is right."

I don't know whether they were telling me the truth or not. I know that I saw some mighty luxurious ranch homes in the Central Valley of California and some horribly sordid migrant quarters. I'm sure there could be a more equitable distribution of the income earned by the agricultural enterprise in that great valley, and I'm sure Christian initiative is called for to accomplish such distribution. On the other hand, I know something of the precarious economic foundation of the nation's specialty crops, how sharply they fluctuate in price, how easily either a crop failure or an overproduction can destroy the farmer's income. It is little wonder they are fearful of generosity. This situation poses a very much larger question to the church. Can we forever tolerate the factory-in-the-field type of agricultural production with its dangerously high degree of specialization, its vast holdings and gambling risks, and its thoroughly rotten foundation of underpaid, unprotected, unbefriended hordes of landless and homeless laborers. Can the Christian eat these "grapes of wrath" without spiritual if not physical indigestion?

On April 7, 1949, Secretary of Agriculture Brannan appeared before a Congressional committee and set forth the proposals for amending the existing Federal Farm Program, which have since become famous as the Brannan Plan. The national leaders of both the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Grange have admitted, indeed complained, that they had had no previous inkling of what the Secretary intended to propose. Yet within forty-eight hours both these great organizations, boasting 1,350,000 and 900,000 families respectively, were officially and vociferously on record against it. One state farm bureau president, when asked by reporters what he thought of Brannan's proposal, is reported to have replied: "I don't know. I haven't heard from national headquarters yet."

There followed months of bitter denunciation of the Brannan Plan by leaders of both organizations on public platforms and in their official journals. By November in the case of the Grange and December in the case of the Farm Bureau, the propaganda campaign was completed and each organization in its annual convention obediently voted resolutions in opposition to the plan. Let it be added that the third national farm group, the National Farmers Union, followed the same procedure but on the opposite side of the fence.

I am not, at this point, concerned about the merits of the Brannan Plan. I am questioning the democratic procedures of our national farm organizations. And I am asking what responsibility has our Christian farmer for public policy? Obviously the kind of federal farm plan we have is profoundly infected with the public interest. It bears on consumers' food prices (and clothing prices), on total agricultural income and its distribution among commodities and among farmers, on employment opportunities in the food industries, on available food for shipment to hungry nations abroad, on nutrition levels in our own country and across the world, on the health of the general economy.

The Christian farmer can no longer be content with the old-fashioned view that his social responsibility ends at his line fence, or as some have put it: "I grow the stuff and get it to the gate. After that it's the other guy's responsibility." By himself the farmer can do little more than that. It is only through organization that he can hope effectively to influence public policy. He has three types of organization open to him: his cooperative, his membership organization, his political party. The Christian farmer must be more than a passive member in all three of these. It is because they have so many passive members that policy can be so easily dictated from the top. Indeed the organization can be captured by special interests totally foreign to agriculture. This has already happened to the leading so-called farm journals.

The church must encourage its farmers to belong to these organizations, to attend the meetings, to speak up in behalf of policies which are conformable to Christian teachings. Before he can do that he must know what Christian teachings are and how they apply. That is a job for the church too.

A few weeks ago seventy rural churchmen met in Washington, D. C., in the annual Rural Churchmen's Seminar, sponsored by eleven denominations and religious groups. For four days they delved into many aspects of American agricultural policy. The startling picture presented to us was \$4,000,000,000 worth of surplus food in Commodity Credit Corporation storage while millions of the world's people abroad still subsist on a caloric diet hardly more than half that of the average American. Yet despite this tragic irony the U. S. State Department has twice killed proposals of the U. N. Food and Agriculture Organization aimed at creating machinery to facilitate the flow of food from surplus to needy sections of the world. How long will the Christian farmer tolerate the use of the product of his labor and God's holy earth as a weapon of cold war?

This problem seems a long way from the "back forty." Yet twice in our generation the long arm of war reached out and pulled the flower of a nation's youth off the farms for the work of destruction. Both times, beneath the diplomatic bickerings and the political slogans has lain the solid reality of economic imperialism, economic injustice, and human want and fear.

If this folly is ever to be stopped, it will not be by stockpiles of atom bombs, by mutual defense pacts, nor by armed aid and intervention. It will only be stopped by the implementation of sound international trade policies, by the development of the economic resources of undeveloped areas and the equitable distribution of the benefits of such development, by sound ratios of population to food supply, and the like. All these are matters of intense and ethical concern to the Christian farmer in America. His church must help him to understand the issues and to make and express Christian judgments in these matters.

Last fall a pastor in the heart of the Wisconsin dairy country invited a group of his parishioners. Most of them were successful dairy farmers. Two or three had other occupations closely related to dairy farming. He put before them the question which stands at the head of this paper. He proposed that they meet once a month until spring to discuss this question specifically in terms of their own experience in the production and marketing of milk. They were a little puzzled at first. What has our religion to do with our business? Gradually they caught on, and as they did their enthusiasm mounted. A month was too long to wait. They began meeting every two weeks, and then weekly.

I have available for distribution at my office in Merom, Indiana, mimeographed copies of their findings. It is not a perfect document. They didn't find answers to all the ethical issues in dairy farming. They didn't even ask all the questions (they passed up, for instance, the oleo tax issue). You probably would disagree with some of the conclusions they did reach. None of this is important. The important thing is that they did what they did. They met. They met in the church and in the name of Christ. They submitted systematically, probably for the first time, their daily vocational and business practices to the scrutiny of the Christian conscience. As the report shows and as wire recordings of portions of their discussion show, they approached the question seriously, open-mindedly, and in the spirit of seekers after truth and right.

If you ask me how can the town and country church help with the task of Christianizing agricultural policy and rural life, this would be my answer. Organize such study groups as this one. It is fine for the preacher to preach about these matters, but few people take preaching seriously. The preacher is a fine fellow. He has to say these things. He means well, but he has never ridden a tractor all day nor bucked the produce market nor tried to pay a farmer's taxes. Forums are all right, but they are always too short, attract too many people. A few, usually the least competent, farmers do a lot of talking and nobody convinces anybody else.

For creative thinking and ultimately for constructive action, give me a little group -- a little group of men (and women) who are in the business. Let the pastor share and guide but not dominate. Let them formulate the questions and pound out the answers. Give me a thousand such little groups strategically placed and we will change the moral tone and the spiritual quality of rural life and agricultural practice in America.

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